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ANNA DE BELOCCA:

A Biographical Sketch.

VICTOR BERLIOZ.



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Mdlle. ANNA DE BELOCCA.

MESSRS. STRAKOSCH have the honor to announce
that

Mdlle. ANNA DE BELOCCA

arrived from Europe, on the S. S. "Germanic," Saturday,
8th inst., and makes her first appearance in America as

ROSINA, in "The Barber of Seville,"

beginning EASTER MONDAY, APRIL 17th, 1876, at the
ACADEMY OF MUSIC.

Further Appearances in Future Announcements.

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ANNA DE BELOCCA:

A Biographical Sketch.

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VICTOR BERLIOZ.

Mlle. ANNA DE BELOCCA will make her first
appearance in New York on Easter
Monday, April 17th,
At the ACADEMY OF MUSIC.

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ANNA DE BELOCCA.

MANY persons have, before us, said that Paris, for all connected with art, is a light near which a privileged few succeed in shining, while thousands of others simply burn their wings. Paris is, at one and the same time, an attraction and a scarecrow, a syren and a minotaur, for the numerous family of those who thirst for success. People seek but fear it, for Paris possesses the double gift of dazzling and terrifying; and, precisely as butterflies, those artists of the air, will always hover round the flame, singers of the Italian school will always come and brave the blaze of the float at the Théâtre Ventadour. Of all artistic careers, that of the stage is indisputably the most fertile in emotions for those who first come out at one of our great lyric theatres. Fraschini feared the way in which he might be received by the Parisian public, as certain passengers fear the ceremony of crossing the line. Jenny Lind was like him. How many others, on whom, subsequently, were showered only bravos and flowers, have shared the terror of Fraschini and Jenny Lind? But when once this Rubicon has been passed, the rewards of the day after are not long in causing those whose hearts palpitated with emotion to forget the agony of the night before. Does not the signature "Paris" upon a dramatic passport entitle the bearer to traverse the two hemispheres, and does it not insure help and protection at the hands of all artistic and literary authorities? The recent disasters of France have not deprived the modern Athens of this time-honored privilege. We desire no other proof than the universal celebrity already attained by the fair Patrician Vocalist whose name, as heading, graces this article.

* * *

Mademoiselle Anna de Belocca, the new star of the Italian Opera, was born on the 4th of January, 1854, at St. Petersburg. Her father, Mons. de Bellokh, a distinguished scholar, is Actual Imperial Russian Councillor of State. Possessed of an independent fortune, and not sharing certain vulgar prejudices, he never endeavored to thwart his daughter's tastes. Far from opposing the natural vocation of his darling Anna, he aided it to the best of his power, encouraging her first steps in the career of art, a career frequently so full of shoals, daily annoyances, and profound disappointments.

It was, therefore, impelled by the loftiest sentiments of art, and assisted by her father's intelligent guidance, that Mdle. de Belocca resolved to go upon the stage. In this respect, she was more fortunate than many other young ladies, for she had not to struggle against the wishes of her family, and pass through those agonizing domestic ordeals which sometimes form such a sombre page in the after-life of many artists. Great pains were bestowed on her education. She speaks five languages, and, in her leisure hours, is fond of cultivating painting, for which she evinced great aptitude ever since she was a child. Her musical education was begun under Mad. Nissen Salaman, in St. Petersburg, and continued in Paris, under Nicolas Lablache. But to M. Strakosch is due the honor of finishing it, and of making Mdle. de Belocca the artist we know her to be at the present day. Few men are endowed with the perseverance,

skill, and determination of M. Strakosch. He was formerly the repetitor of Mad. Pasta, from whom he obtained the singer's secret, and his life will be noted for his having the good fortune to produce two stars of the first order: Adelina Patti and Anna de Belocca. The two pupils have become mistresses of their art without effort, for Anna, like Adelina, her predecessor, conquered for herself, from her very *début*, one of the first places on the Italian stage. It is rather difficult, when looking at Mdle. de Belocca, to believe she is of Muscovite descent. Her brown hair, her large black eyes, shaded by long lashes, and her complexion of dead white, resemble rather the Roman or the Spanish than the Russian type. Under the Castilian skirt, this fair child of St. Petersburg might be taken for a handsome maiden of Granada. And what a throat, too, there is in that charming head!

* * *

We do not pretend to follow our *prima donna* into all the saloons where a limited number of privileged persons were the first to enjoy the pleasure of hearing her. We will content ourselves with stating that, previously to first coming out in her charming part of Rosina, she was already known to the aristocratic world of Paris. As a guest in the best houses of the Faubourg St. Germain, to which her noble birth procured her access, she obtained a rich harvest of bravos, thanks to the purity of her strains, and enlisted very many sympathies by the extreme distinction of her personal appearance. But this success in society does not suffice to consecrate an artistic reputation. The judgment of critics, and of all ranks of the public, must countersign the certificates signed in the forcing-houses of politeness, where people applaud under any circumstances. The praises, however, of the noble Faubourg had reached the ears of the *dilettanti* of the Théâtre Italien and even those of the crowd. When, therefore, Mdle. de Belocca came out at the Ventadour, the public were already predisposed in favor of the new star discovered by M. Strakosch. Some remembered the profound impression which her beautiful voice had produced in the church of St. Pierre de Chaillot. Others had not forgotten the concert of sacred music on Good Friday, when Mdle. Anna de Belocca achieved so genuine a success, at the Odéon. Fifteen hundred persons had heard her that evening; they had listened to her as a vocalist with delight and admired her, as a woman, with rapture. But it is a more difficult ordeal to sing an entire opera than to give a few pieces at a Soirée or a Concert. Since the time of Alboni, it was the first occasion on which the part of Rosina was going to be sung as Rossini composed it. This part, written for a contralto, had not, after that date, been approached by any save sopranos, each of whom arranging it to suit her own voice, had altered, more or less, Rossini's thoughts, by modifying or disfiguring the thousands of arabesque ornaments which the composer so lavishly scattered about. This was, the reader may recollect, the favorite sin of Mad. Patti, a sin in which she absolutely revelled, indulging in such dangerous leaps and vocal flights that some austere critics went so far as to say she spoiled Rossini's intention. It is as well to repeat, in order to excuse the most fanciful of fair singers, that the part of Rosina was written for a contralto; this is why sopranos are so often tempted to adapt it to their own capabilities. With Mdle. de Belocca we were at length to hear Rossini's notion in

all its purity. Immediately she appeared on the stage, Rosina must have been sensible, by the flattering murmurs which escaped from all the boxes, of the impression caused by her beauty, enhanced by her graceful Castilian costume. These murmurs told her that it was for her, for her alone, a high-class public had crowded the house. A sympathetic link was soon formed between the audience and the young beginner; indeed it may be said to have been spontaneous. The first notes were heard! Every one was charmed with so marvellous a contralto. When we say a contralto, we do not express all we think. Mdlle. Anna de Belocca's voice is, at one and the same time, a contralto and a mezzo-soprano, admirable in quality, of very extensive compass, exceedingly full, and more harmonious than words can describe. When the young *Diva* takes the middle notes, which are so remarkable in her case, and which are, at the present day, so sacrificed by other vocalists, it seems, as M. François Oswald has well said in *Le Gaulois*, "that we hear the sound produced by a crystal bell, the vibrations of which cause on the ear a sensation, as it were, of heat." This comparison is exceedingly just. There truly is, in this warm-toned voice, a roundness and fullness really magisterial. Mdlle. Anna de Belocca possesses gifts which are rare at the present day, and, so to speak, innate in her. In the first place, she has good taste, and does not endeavor to exaggerate, like so many vocalists who displace their voices in order, by certain leaps from the low to the high notes, to extort applause, which the crowd sometimes gives, but which genuine connoisseurs will never accord. The young lady's voice is not extraordinarily strong, but, as the musical critic of the *Courier de l'Etat* had very judiciously observed: "Voices are like diamonds; the largest are not the most beautiful." In short, despite her youth, Mdlle. de Belocca may already be ranked among the vocalists *de primo cartello*. In the whole force of her youth and the whole brilliancy of her talent, Alboni as Rosina had no notes more beautiful than those which struck us when we heard Mdlle. de Belocca. In the singing lesson, a Russian air, of grand style, produced a profound impression.

But the most marked success was in the brindisi from *Lucrezia Borgia*. The house, electrified, encored it, and a perfect ovation began. Felicitations arrived from all sides. Mdlle. Alboni came and complimented the *débutante* in her room, and M. Strakosch received a most flattering letter addressed to him by M. Charles Blanc in the name of the Minister of Public Instruction. But what must have touched the *Diva* most were the numerous telegrams sent by the first families of St. Petersburg, and filled with the warm congratulations of the writers to their young compatriot on her brilliant *début*. All the testimonies of sympathy set the Russian colony in commotion, and, at the second performance, they met by appointment at the Théâtre Italien. It was the first time since our disasters that so aristocratically filled a house had been seen. Diamonds sparkled in every box; rich toilets and brilliant dresses were seen everywhere; in a word, it was a splendid evening of times gone by. The mere appearance of Rosina called down a perfect rain of flowers. In the Singing Lesson this rain became an avalanche. After the brindisi from *Lucrezia Borgia* the stage was suddenly transformed into a variegated and perfumed flower-bed. Bouquets, too large to be flung down, were passed on to the stage by the artists of the valiant orchestra conducted by the celebrated *maestro*, Vianesi. The

piano was so overloaded with bouquets and garlands, that Rosina and Lindor nearly disappeared beneath them. The entire house was enchanted with the young artist's middle notes, and with the natural, frank quality of her voice, which brought back Alboni to the minds of old frequenters of the Ventadour. What a distance had been traversed from the evening of Good Friday to this ovation in October! Yet it was only a few months! How much progress had been made since that "Quis est homo?" which had, even then, excited general admiration at the Odéon! What an undisputed and indisputable success! Yet what was the terror of the vocalist! A doctor had given her a powder to prevent it, but its pretended marvellous efficacy was of no effect. It is said that, from time to time, M. Strakosch, her master, seated in his managerial box, exclaimed: "Smile, smile!" She did smile, but what foolish fears lay beneath her smile! Between the acts, M. Strakosch came to inform her that the King of Hanover desired to compliment her.

Already moved by the royal felicitations on her beautiful singing, her trouble increased when the monarch said that he must have been personally acquainted with her father. The era of great triumphs was beginning for the young artist.

* * *

It was in *La Cenerentola* that Mdle. de Belocca made her second appearance. This piece was performed for the first time at the Teatro Valle, Rome, during the carnival of 1817. It was not produced at the Ventadour till 1822, five years afterwards, the artists being Pellegrini, Galli, Bordogni, and Mad. Bononi. It is one of the Pesarese composer's masterpieces in the buffo style, and contains several numbers of high value, and a rich vein of melody. Mad. Pasta, who was especially good in it, popularized it in Italy and Austria. At Trieste, for instance, the public insisted on its being performed one hundred successive nights.

In Paris, the principal part was sung by Mad. Malibran, whose memory Alfred de Musset immortalized in the following verses:

O Ninette! où sont-ils, belle muse adorée,
Ces accents pleins d'amour, de charme et de terreur,
Qui voltigeaient le soir sur ta lèvre inspirée,
Comme un parfum léger sur l'aubépine en fleur?
Où vibre maintenant cette voix éplorée,
Cette harpe vivante, attachée à ton cœur?

N'était-ce pas hier, fille joyeuse et folle,
Que ta verve railleuse animait Corilla,
Et que tu nous lançais, avec la Rosina,
La roulade amoureuse et l'œillade espagnole?
Ces pleurs sur tes bras nus, quand tu chantaies "Le Saule,"
N'était-ce pas hier, pâle Desdemona?

Several of her admirers often advised Mad. Pasta to sing *La Cenerentola* in Paris, as it had obtained for her such popularity in Italy, but she refused. Well, this character, in which Bononi, Monbelli, Pisaroni, Pasta, Malibran, and Alboni distinguished themselves, was to prove a new and frank triumph for Mdle. de Belocca. What an enchanting spell was exercised in her very first scene! "Una volta c'era un Re," the delicious air which the young girl sings near the fire-place, evoked applause which proved to the humble Cinderella that her success was about to equal the success obtained a few days previously by the fasci-

nating Rosina. It is true that no part could suit the young artist's grace and theatrical qualifications better than that of Cinderella. It is impossible to imagine a Cinderella at one and the same time more natural, more candid, and more seductive. Mdlle. de Belocca's talent is characterized by something original, rarely found on the stage nowadays! Correct bearing, perfect truthfulness, a girlish air, a pure and harmonious voice—what more is needed to entrance us in a part which by tradition imposes on the most coquettish artist a simple gown of serge.

It was not without a certain amount of apprehension that Mdlle. de Belocca's friends—and her sympathetic voice had already gained her many new ones that evening—awaited the famous rondo, the terror of singers, many of whom have never dared to venture on the part, on account of the difficulties which Rossini has heaped up in it. The majority of the audience recollected that this number had formed one of Alboni's most brilliant triumphs, and they dreaded it for the bold Muscovite maiden to whom it was about to prove a second *début*. Mdlle. Anna de Belocca surmounted all difficulties; her admirable voice passed through the dangers, as if to do so were mere child's play. The bravos and the recalls proved that thenceforward she could lay claim to the succession of Alboni. It is to this, by the way, that we may assert the fair young patrician, who now wants only experience to attain perfection, is directing her steps. Study will give her the flexibility and executive certainty necessary to render irreproachable the personages of the buffo repertory. But the richness of her voice is an established fact. Purity and sonorousness—all the secret of her talent, nay, we will say more, of her individuality, is summed up in these two words. Then, there is the accent, also, which strikes you in Mdlle. de Belocca the first time you hear her. This fair fruit sent us by the North will ripen rapidly under the beams of the float, and the day is not far distant when M. Strakosch's pupil will leave us nothing to desire. MM. Jouvin, Benedict, Paul Foucher, Oswald, Joncières, Clarke, Emile Badoche, Chapus, and several other musical critics, have foretold a brilliant career for her. The Russian press and the English press have made her incipient glory the subject of long and conscientious essays. More than one poet has already written enthusiastic verses in her praise, and a young Florentine says, when speaking of her:—

Qual delle grazie manca in te?—Nissuna,
La voce e l'anima intreccian le canore
Note sublimi di colui ch'aduna,
Dei cieli il riso, dei miseri il dolore.

The *Diva* now sung by poets and applauded by the public completes that trilogy of the Italian school: Malibran, Patti, and Belocca.

* * *

At her third *début*, we find Mdlle. de Belocca as Arsace, one of Alboni's favorite characters. It was not without impatience that her appearance was awaited in an assumption where the talent of the vocalist must be sustained by the skill of the actress. Some one had been guilty of a slight indiscretion, and a report had got abroad to the effect that it was *Semiramide* in which the daughter of the Russian Councillor of State was to have come out, but that M. Strakosch had persuaded her to select the character of Rosina. Everybody, however, felt that her lofty features indicated a tendency to the dramatic rather than the buffo style. Mdlle. de Belocca is the most elegant, the most graceful, and the most enchant

ing impersonification of Arsace. She wears the short tunic and fleshings with incomparable ease and modesty. Her somewhat masculine face, her expressive eyes, and her smile, so full of frankness, are marvellously beautiful under the warrior's casque. Certain critics thought the young *débutante* did not portray with sufficient energy all the passions—rage, love, filial duty, and particularly the thirst for vengeance on his father's assassin—which should agitate the heart of Arsace. But they forget that the skill of an actress is not extemporized like the marvellous natural gifts of the singer; they forgot more especially that Mdlle. de Belocca is still very young, and has not yet acquired experience of the stage. The patrician actress has been transplanted from the saloons of St. Petersburg to one of the first lyric theatres in the world, and has had to face a public who are used up, very difficult to please, and exceedingly exacting. In the stormy character of Arsace, Mdlle. Anna de Belocca has revealed to us an elevated and poetic nature; she has given us in it proofs of her profound sentiment for art. One of the duties of sincere criticism is carefully to analyze the sensations we feel, and to lie in watch for the slightest imperfections, as they arise, in order kindly to draw attention to them. Mdlle. de Belocca is a meritorious artist and a studious woman. She would be the first to regret exaggerated praises, which harm more than they oblige the persons to whom they are addressed. She knows that the intoxication of sudden fame is one of the causes which have frequently prevented a considerable number of beginners from continuing the studies without which the most precocious talent is used up and perishes. But Mdlle. de Belocca is intent on occupying a high place in the world of music, and the amenity with which she accepts all loyal criticism proves how ardently she desires to attain perfection by sustained application.

* * *

Were our limits less restricted, we should speak of still something else: Rossini's Mass, in which Mdlle. de Belocca sang, calling forth, by her masterly rendering, the applause of the *dilettanti* of the Italiens, as she had, a year previously, called forth the applause of the public of the Odéon. The Mass proved that she excels in sacred music. We may also mention, by the way, the evening party given on the 23d April, at Marshal MacMahon's, when Mdlle. de Belocca sang the air from *Semiramide*, the *Brindisi* from *Lucrezia Borgia*, the duet, with M. de Sario, from *Don Giovanni*, and Mad. de Rothschild's sweet melody, "Si vous n'avez rien à me dire." The effect produced was immense, and the master of the house cordially complimented the young artist.

* * *

The reader already knows that it was the foggy sky of the north which saw the first smile of this younger sister of Sontag and Pasta.

As a valiant poet has said:—

Le sort moqueur vous a fait naître,
Dans le pays des blancs frimas,
Mais vous avez voulu connaître
Le soleil d'or de nos climats;
Car ce sont les échos de France
Qui savent répéter la voix
Et l'harmonieuse romance

Du rossignol au fond des bois.
 Ce fut pour nous un jour de fête,
 Dont nous aimons le souvenir,
 Le jour qui ceignit votre tête
 D'un éclat qui ne peut pâlir.
 Redites-nous longtemps encore
 Ces airs qui vibrent dans nos cœurs,
 En chantant vous ferez éclore
 Et des sourires.....et des fleurs.

But something more precious than a few stanzas for this graceful child of St. Petersburg were the words addressed to her by Alboni on the night of the performance of *La Cenerentola*. Under the circumstances the compliment of a rival is more valuable than the sonnet of a poet. Mad. Alboni had come to hear the new *Diva* of the Italiens, of whom all Paris was talking. She was impelled by a very natural sentiment of curiosity. She wanted to know how Mdlle. de Belocca would sustain a part which had been one of her own most intoxicating triumphs. Between the first and the second act, Alboni said to her: "It is you who will succeed me!" Criticism has since ratified the prediction of the celebrated cantatrice.

On Sunday, May 2d, 1874, Mdlle. de Belocca's benefit took place. Besides appearing in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, for which the subscribers had asked, she interpreted in a remarkable manner the last act of Vaccai's *Romeo e Giulietta*. Her success was greater than ever; she was literally covered with flowers. But she has not allowed her head to be turned by the triumphs that have brightened her path from the very commencement; neither the felicitations of the public, the amicable words of Alboni, nor the praises of cosmopolitan *feuilletonnistes* have spoiled her. She has retained her modesty and child-like simplicity, and they encompass her person with a sympathetic aureola. She sometimes is attacked by the *Heinweh* traditional among northern nations.

In the midst of Parisian *fêtes*, she is thinking of the country of snow, whither the divine Bosio, one of the last to interpret Rossini, went to die. She regrets the ice of the Neva, and the beautiful nights of St. Petersburg; she weeps to be in Russia!

Unfortunately for you, beautiful *Diva*, you no longer belong to yourself. You belong to contemporary art; to the Italian stage; to Europe, to the old world, and to the new! Forgive me, but there must be no more snow! no more regrets! no more tears! Flowers, flowers, forever flowers! Paris has gone mad for the new Rosina, while London, Vienna, Milan, and New York already envy her. With you, the Parisians do not experience the least difficulty in believing themselves in Spain, where they can live without undergoing the inconvenience of civil war.

What! Already tired of Almaviva's mandoline; of Spanish melodies, interrupted by French *fêtes*; and of the ovations at the Ventadour?

Are you fatigued with your character of a nightingale metamorphosed into a fair Parisian? Renounce, for the moment, the country of snow and ice. You shall return at some future time, and show your compatriots the crowns flung at your feet in the theatres of all the capitals of Europe. But come back to us very soon, come back to us very soon!

Never forget it was in Paris that your name was inscribed in the book of gold of great contemporary artists, and that the Theatre in the Rue Méhul was the cradle of your renown. St. Petersburg gave you life; Paris gave you glory.

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